

MY FLESH IS TRUE FOOD, AND MY BLOOD IS TRUE DRINK – Biblical Commentary by F. Alberto Maggi OSM

Jn 6.51-58

At that time Jesus said to the crowds, "I am the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh."

The Jews then disputed among themselves, saying, "How can this man give us his flesh to eat?" So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day."

For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him. As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me, he also will live because of me. This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died. Whoever feeds on this bread will live forever."

The words that we read now and will comment, those of Jesus in John's Gospel, are so grave that, at the end, a great part of His disciples will abandon Him and will not return to Him again. Let's see then, what Jesus said that is so grave and important.

In chapter 6 of John's Gospel we find a long and intense teaching on the Holy Communion. John is the only evangelist that does not tell of the last supper, but is that who, more than the others, reflects profoundly on its significance.

Therefore chapter 6 is a teaching, a catechesis to the Christian community, on the Holy Communion. Reading chapter 6 from verse 51. "« I am...»" and Jesus claims the divine condition, "«...the living bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. »"

Jesus guarantees that it is in following Him that permits mankind to have such a quality of life that it is indestructible. This is the eternal life. Jesus, Son of God, makes Himself bread so that those that

welcome Him are able to make themselves bread for others, becoming themselves sons of God. “«*And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh.* »” – Jesus uses the word ‘flesh’, that indicates mankind in his weakness.

That which Jesus is saying is very important: the life of God is not given outside of human reality. There cannot be communication of the Spirit where there is not even the gift of the flesh. Therefore the gift of God passes through the flesh, says Jesus. The weak earthly aspect of His life. Here the evangelist presents a confliction amongst the men of religion who raise themselves up to meet God – a God that the religion has made distant, inavvicinable, unobtainable – but, actually, he is a God who comes down to meet mankind.

“*The Jews..*”, with this expression in John’s Gospel it indicates the authority, “*...disputed among themselves, saying, «How can this man give us his flesh to eat? »*” A God that, does not pretend gifts from mankind, but gives himself until he arrives at the point of immersing with them, he makes himself food for them. This is not accepted by the religious authority that base all their power on the separation between God and mankind.

A God that wants to be welcomed by mankind and immerge with them, this for them is not only intolerable, but is dangerous. Well then, Jesus says to them: “«*Truly, truly, I say to you,* »”, therefore the double affirmation “*Truly, truly, I say to you,*” it is this that comes before Jesus’ solemn and important declaration, “«*...unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day*»”.

Jesus refers to the image of the lamb, the Easter lamb. The night of the Exodus, Moses had commanded the Jews to eat the lamb because it would have given them strength to begin the journey towards freedom and to use the blood to cover the door posts because it would have saved them from the actions of the angle of death.

So, Jesus presents Himself as flesh, a food that gives the capacity to undertake a journey towards the full freedom, and His blood does not give liberation from the earthly death, but liberates from the definite death. Then Jesus, many times His affirmation was not clear, says: “*Whoever feeds on my flesh..*” The original Greek verb used was ‘trogon’, meaning ‘to chew, to breakup’

Therefore Jesus wants to avoid that the adherence to Him will be ideal, but it must be concrete. In fact He says: “«*Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.* »” Life eternal for Jesus is not a future prize for good behavior in the present, but a possibility of a quality of life in the present. Jesus does not say “you will have eternal life”. The life is already eternal. Who, like Him, makes his own life a gift of love for others, has a life of such a quality that is indestructible.

“«*.. and I will raise him up on the last day*»”. The last day is not the end of time. The last day, in John’s Gospel, is the day of the death of Jesus in which He, dying, communicates with the Spirit, that is, the element of life that permits, to who welcomes it, an indestructible life.

And Jesus confirms that His “*«...flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink »*”. With Jesus there are no external rules that mankind must observe, but the assimilation of a new life. And His flesh is true food, that which feeds the life of mankind, and His blood is a true drink, an element that enters into mankind and unifies with him. No more an external code to observe, but a life to assimilate.

Jesus presents us a God that does not absorb mankind, but strengthen them. A God that does not want energy from mankind, but communicate his to them. Jesus continues to insist: “*«Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him»*”. Here is the full fusion of Jesus with mankind and mankind with Jesus.

The God of Jesus asks to be welcomed to immerge with mankind and expand the capacity of love. “*«As the living Father..»*” and it is the only time that God is called a living Father, “*« sent me, »*”, the Father sent the son to manifest his unlimited love, “*«...and I live because of the Father, so whoever feeds on me...»*”, Jesus again insists with this verb that indicates not a theoretical adherence, but real and concrete “*«...will live because of me »*”.

The life received from God corresponds to a life communicated to others. This is the meaning of the Holy Communion. And, as the Father sent his son to be a visible manifestation of an unlimited love, so those that welcome Jesus are called to manifest an unconditional love.

And Jesus concludes: “*« This is the bread that came down from heaven, not as the fathers ate and died »*”. Jesus puts a finger in the sore of the failed Exodus. All those that left Egypt died. Their sons entered. And Jesus presents His Exodus that is destined to realizes itself fully.

And again Jesus insists: “*«Whoever feeds..»*”, therefore total and full adhesion, not symbolic, “*«.on this. bread will live forever »*”. Who orientates his own life, with Jesus and like Jesus, in favour of others, has already a life that death cannot interrupt.